Literature

Lost — a State of Mind

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WHEN the modern literary man comes out of his university he is thoroughly disgusted with one thing: his intellect. Then when the poetic or the dramatic instincts of the graduate bid him write, he becomes acutely aware of another predicament: he has no moral or literary principles to guide him. The natural result, seen clearly in the literary world, is an universal chaos of American letters, a chaos made up of hundreds of voices, each voice shouting something different from its fellow voice, but all contributing a widespread jumble of half-derided affirmations and negations. The critics looking for the cause have ascribed the reasons to a dozen different occurrences.

Henry Seidel Canby, perhaps the sanest of American critics, in "American Estimates" (1929) says:

> The alterations in manners, morals, esthetics, family relations, religion, and especially the manifestations of unrest in literature, which are visible everywhere are charged to the War, to decadence, to barbarism, to perversity, to Bolshevism, to everything but the real cause which is that we have entered new times that have brought new minds with them.

That is perfectly obvious, but it does not touch rock bottom. Professor Boynton in "Some Contemporary Americans" thinks that a healthy pessimism is the antidote in a muddled world, but his pessimism turns out to be a somberly realistic approach to life. That evidently is not the antidote. His cure is one of the causes of the muddled world. Mr. Muir in "Transition" thinks that the cause of the chaos is due to the fact that we are in an age of transition. That would be merely a circumstance, and not the cause. Paul Elmer More ascribes the cause to the espousal by the moderns of monism. But I think that is only the proximate cause.

The real ultimate reason for the present confusion is that since the moderns have put monism into practice they have lost a state of mind. They lost it shortly after the War. The name of that state of mind is *certitude,* or the firm assent to truth. Hardly any literary man nowadays is sure of anything. He is not sure of God, religion, morality, and what seems more important to him, he is not sure of his literary principles, his esthetics. The sounds of war among the estheticians, a war carried on in a vacuum, manage, against all the principles of classical physics, to escape to the outside world.

Joseph Wood Krutch, with all the best will in the world, starts out to chart modern times in "The Modern Temper" (1929). Here is the outline of his research work: First, "historical criticism has destroyed Christian Evidences"; second, "biology has shown how unlikely it is for man to receive transcendental knowledge"; yet man has implanted in him religious and ethical desires. Then he suddenly finds out that "he is an ethical animal in an universe that has no ethical element."

Now what can man do about it? Shall he follow Bertrand Russell and George Santayana "who would like to have us act *as if* we still believed things that were once

thought to be true"? He gives the answer in the chapter called "The Phantom of Certitude." To act that way is impossible because man will not live by abstract ideas, nor will he continually cajole himself along, knowing that what he desires has no relation to the outside world. Therefore the science of modern metaphysics "merely confirms the very despair that he set out to combat." The author thinks that the importation of a race of barbarians such as the Russians might save human nature for another century. But he dismisses the idea, and concludes "Ours is a lost cause, and there is no place for us in the universe, but we are not, for all that, sorry to be human. We should rather die as men than live as animals."

The foregoing sounds like the "Invictus" of Henley, which was thought to be so naughty in the 1890's. It is evidently a sincere search for the truth, but Mr. Krutch's intellect has betrayed him. He began with the doubt of Descartes and ended up with the cynicism of Anatole France. His search for certitude drew a blank, because he had no certitude to start with.

Mr. Canby is not sure of much either, though he has by no means reached the stage of calling in the Russians. Mr. Canby is not an editor of the *Nation.* From his chapter called "In Time of Confusion," we read:

> The Fundamentalists' conceptions of life and the universe, upon which English literature of the nineteenth century was largely based, began visibly to disintegrate in many important places under the impact of applied science. Basic assumptions have changed, and the books have changed with them.

Then discussing some of the modern novelists he says:

> In the "Manhattan Transfer" of John Dos Passos, as in Joyce's "Ulysses" and Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dolloway," the thing has gone farther, probably farther than we readers will ever go. In these books there are no assumptions at all, except the negative assumption of a vast incoherence; there is no more fixity in the moral world than in the physical world of electrons.

Turning our eyes to the field of modern poetry, we come upon an article written by Allen Tate, one of the modern poets. The article is entitled "American Poetry since 1920." Mr. Tate was one of the "Fugitives," the group that carried on a silent rebellion from 1921 to 1925 against the domination of the blatant Chicago school of poets. I present his views in a summarized form, and remark that the new poets are those who have come to the front since 1920.

> The important thing, then to remember, so far as the new poets are concerned, is the failure of their predecessors to leave them firm ground to stand upon.
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> The stylistic excellence of contemporary American poetry is equaled only by the variety of the chaos that it holds to view.
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> The only temporo-spatial support modern poetry can hope to find lies in a group of moribund cultures.

Then, in summing up the excellences and the shortcomings of the new poets, we read that Samuel Putnam and Mark Turbyfill "are extreme examples of anti-intellectualism"; that "E. E. Cummings is a deeply moral sensibility without moral ideas"; that "Yvor Winters represents with his symbols of inversion and sterility, with his anti-intellectualism, the most ambitious reach of the West to erect its disorder and rootless energy into a symbol of the whole American scene"; that "The Tall Men" of Donald Davidson is an "interesting poem that is brilliantly and incoherently written"; that "Those Not Elect" by Miss Leonie Adams are "poems that often conceal their central ideas"; that "Marianne Moore is a Victorian in whom Victorian convictions are lacking, but in whom remain the habits of feeling which correspond to those convictions; she is deficient in ideas"; that in the poems of Archibald MacLeish "there seems to be no leading symbol that plays upon the ideas."

And so it goes through dozens of modern poets, novelists and dramatists. The cynical effort of Eugene O'Neill in trying to construct a new god in the play "Dynamo" is the effort of a man who is sure of nothing else but a blind despair; the group of "Fugitives" finally in 1925 broke up because, as we read in the foreword of their anthology "Fugitives" (1928), they could not attend to editorial work any longer, and also because "they disagree among themselves on the literary principles which they persistently argued." Even the editors of the "Hogarth Essays," the latest attempt to bring England's literature to a saner outlook, find places in their last year's volume for such contradictory writers as Herbert Read and Leonard Woolf, for T. S. Eliot and Robert Graves. And they tuck an essay of Gertrude Stein's in the back of the book. The editors are sure of very little, by including so much.

If the reader thinks that I am trying to build up a case, and wonders why I have not cited the works of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, Josephine Preston Peabody, and others, I can merely state that the moderns think that the Misses Teasdale and Peabody are decadent, they are too moral. And as evidence of the modern spirit creeping into Miss Millay's latest work, the recent poems in the *Saturday Review* are indications that her work is changing. I trust the ladies will pardon me for saying it; but if they were talking among themselves they would admit that if the women writers predominantly ever become infected with the modern spirit they will go much farther than the men.

The exposition given above seems to me to be fair enough, because Mr. Krutch, although a writer for the *Nation,* wrote his book for the *Atlantic Monthly;* Mr. Canby wrote in the *Saturday Review;* and Mr. Tate wrote his article in the January, 1929, number of the *Bookman.* And I believe that these three magazines are fair specimens of conservatively liberal thought in the literary world. If I were also to quote from the *Dial,* from *S4N,* from the *Little Review,* from the *New Republic,* from *Broom,* etc., the picture of the literary chaos would be more somber, and the loss of that mental state of Certitude by the moderns would be even more poignant.

If this were a sermon I might refer the reader to the first chapter of the Romans. St. Paul, besides being a witness to the folly of the cross, was also a first-hand witness to the paganism and its effects on the Rome of his days. But as this is not a sermon, perhaps it might be more literary to say that the spirit of Henry Adams, who was so sceptical of all human institutions in his "Education," has come back with seven worse devils to haunt the minds of the moderns. What grounds a Catholic writer would have towards forming a rapprochement with the moderns will be discussed in a later article.